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RACISM, RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, XENOPHOBIA AND RELATED INTOLERANCE

Written statement submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[13 March 1998]

1. The Society for Threatened Peoples would like to draw the attention of the Commission on Human Rights to the region of Guayana which is part of the State of Bolívar, Venezuela. As a consequence of Presidential Decree 1850 (1997) which has been issued in the context of the Land-Use Plan for the Forest Reserve of Imataca, the situation of the indigenous peoples living in the Sierra Imataca is going to worsen. Particularly affected are the Pemones, Arawakos, Akawaios and Kariñas. Decree 1850 violates national as well as international juridical environmental norms. The Decree does not incorporate the indigenous peoples into the Plan; therefore, it violates the indigenous peoples' property rights in those areas in which they are actually living. On the contrary, these areas are exposed to mineral exploration and the ensuing exploitation which will end in the reduction of the indigenous territories.

2. The Government of Venezuela even refuses to recognize indigenous peoples as peoples. Reducing their territories has systematically worsened the health, environmental and food situations. Nearly 98 per cent of the population living in that area is infected with malaria. Also, the health of the indigenous peoples is weakened by diarrhoeal and bronchio-pulmonary diseases. Many of these peoples inhabit the banks of the rivers Kuyuni, Venamo, Supamo and others which are contaminated by toxic deposits from mining activities. The rivers are contaminated by mercury and mud. No water supply or other minimum public service exists. Therefore, the indigenous peoples are forced to use the water and to eat fish from these rivers, impacting their health seriously.

3. The indigenous peoples of the Sierra Imataca ask the State of Venezuela to recognize their right to territorial property in order to guarantee and ensure their nutrition and health, which are indispensable for their physical and cultural continuity. Also, they ask for full participation in the decision-making processes on development policy at the different levels of government which would impact on indigenous territories.

4. The Constitution of Venezuela establishes equality before the law. Unfortunately, it seems that this has been used by the State rather as an instrument to encourage discrimination towards indigenous peoples. The State refuses to acknowledge the specific rights of indigenous peoples in accordance with their cultural distinction, thereby fostering their assimilation which will end in the loss of their cultural roots.

5. These serious reasons impel us to request the Commission on Human Rights to take note of this information and to request from the Government of Venezuela an official report on the situation, including a plan for resolving the problems mentioned above.